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Barth's Reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*:

Exploring Christlikeness and Homecoming in the Novel

Abstract: While the theological and literary significance of Calvin and of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* has been critically explored, the role of the theology of Karl Barth and his understanding of the parable has been largely ignored. Here, Barth's presence in the novel is discussed as an influence on the development of John Ames's self-understanding in theological terms, in particular through his growing identification with the younger son in the parable, as well as with the father. It is argued that the relationship between the Prodigal Son, Ames and the reader is given focus in the themes of Christlikeness and homecoming which Barth's reading of the parable encourages.

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, Karl Barth, John Calvin, parable of the Prodigal Son, Christlikeness, homecoming

Faith is a foundational principle in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*.¹ The faith which the narrator, John Ames, has in God, and in the characters who populate his professional and personal life, lies at the heart of the extended reflections he has written for his son as he prepares for his death. The influence of John Calvin on Ames's faith has been thoroughly considered by others,² although the significance of the influence of Karl Barth on Ames' beliefs has been largely ignored. Similarly, Robinson's other writings and interviews

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2006). Hereafter cited by page number.

² See, for example, Rebecca Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction", *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (Winter 2010), 321-340; Christopher Leise, "'That little incandescence': Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*", *Studies in the Novel* 41.3 (Fall 2009), 348-367; Todd Shy, "Religion and Marilynne Robinson", *Salmagundi* 155-156 (Summer 2007), 251-264.

on matters of faith have been quarried to bring new insights to the novel,³ although the way in which the novel might be read as enabling new faith perspectives in its reader is less frequently argued.⁴ The recurrent refrain of the parable of the Prodigal Son contributes to an understanding of faith in the novel, and has also initiated much critical debate, not least from Robinson herself.⁵ This article offers a reading of the novel which draws together Barth's distinctive reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Ames's narrative and Robinson's writing about her liberal Protestant faith. I suggest that the parable highlights themes of Christlikeness and homecoming which may be traced throughout the novel and which powerfully invoke the understanding of faith which Robinson holds so dear. These themes, I argue, are informed by Barth's distinctive reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son and are elucidated by Ames's shifting appropriation of the characters in the parable. Their presence in the novel offers the reader a deeply personal and compelling understanding of what faith might mean.

1. Theological Influences in *Gilead*

John Ames's memoir to his young son recalls the contrasting understandings of faith held by his father and his grandfather. An unbridgeable rift between the two had been caused by their contrasting responses to the moral question of opposition to slavery. Ames's response, or lack of it, to this underlying issue in his society and his family, is contrasted with his deep involvement in the other (and related) moral issue raised in the novel. The son of his

³ Amy Hungerford, for example, in *Postmodern Belief: American Religion and Literature since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), has read the novel in light of Robinson's article "Onward Christian Liberals" (*American Scholar* 75:2 (Spring 2006), 42-51) among other writings by Robinson.

⁴ An exception is D.W. Schmidt's article, "In the Name of the Father: Male Voice, Feminist Authorship, and the Reader in *Gilead*", in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 66:2 (2014), 119-130. Schmidt argues that the sympathetic narration of Ames is the novel's way of giving the reader an experience of the prevenient grace referred to at the end of the novel.

⁵ See, for example, Rebecca Painter's "Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson", *Christianity and Literature* 58:3 (Spring 2009), 485-492.

best friend and fellow minister has returned to Gilead. Jack Boughton is Ames's godson, and had left the town some years ago in disgrace. Ames struggles to accept him as a repentant Prodigal, and is unaware until the end of the novel that Jack's return has been prompted by his relationship with an African American woman. This loving relationship has resulted in the birth of a child but he is prevented from marrying by the antimiscegenation law of Tennessee and by the woman's father, also a preacher, who cannot accept Jack's lack of faith.

Robinson's later novels, *Home*⁶ and *Lila*,⁷ confront the issue of race more robustly than does *Gilead*. However, Christopher Douglas has argued that, in *Gilead*, Robinson has failed to grapple faithfully with the legacy of slavery as it interacted with Christianity at the period in which the novel is set. Douglas's argument rests on the conviction that, in the novel, Robinson is silent on questions of doctrine and beliefs, including those which supported slavery, and instead presents true religion as authentic and communicable experience. Christianity is offered as a 'multicultural identity' which leads the reader away from troubling issues of Christian theology or ideas.⁸ However, while race is an implicit rather than explicit area of concern in this novel, the content of belief is indeed addressed, particularly through interaction with the work of theologians such as Barth and Calvin. The influence of these theologians is established in various ways, both at a material level and at the level of shifting and deepening understanding on the part of Ames.⁹

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (London: Virago, 2008).

⁷ Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (London: Virago, 2014).

⁸ For Douglas, 'We need to address not only Christian practice historically and in the present but also theology and the social actuality of Christian belief. The liberal Christian Robinson opposes some of the cultural politics of the conservative evangelical and fundamentalist resurgence on the level of ideas and values, so she understandably prefers religious experience, dishonestly cleansing "true" Christianity of its history by "forgetting" unsavoury aspects.' "Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44:3 (2011), 333-353, 351. Thomas F. Haddox, in *Hard Sayings: The Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013), offers a similarly critical argument about Robinson's privileging of religious experience over Christian doctrine, although from a rather different perspective from that of Douglas.

⁹ Lynne Hinojosa, in "John Ames as Historiographer: Pacificism, Racial Reconciliation, and Agape in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*", *Religion and Literature* 47.2 (Summer 2015), 117-142, argues convincingly that

The reader is told that Ames has not moved beyond Gilead, except for the short period when he trained for the ministry, but his exposure to contemporary theological scholarship is carefully established. He surreptitiously reads Feuerbach (74) in his youth, and comments that he had read ‘Owen and James and Huxley and Swedenborg and, for heaven’s sake, Blavatsky’ (269) while still living with his parents. The thinking of more traditional theologians, such as John Calvin and Karl Barth, is given more exposure in the novel, however. Their work exists both as artefacts and as dialogue partners in Ames’s inner life, to which we are given access through the novel.

Before turning to the influence of Barth, we should briefly note that the significance of Calvinism in the novel has been debated. For Todd Shy,¹⁰ Robinson emphasises only the most positive aspects of Calvinism in her portrayal of Ames, pushing Reformation faith towards a Christian humanism that Calvin would not have recognised or endorsed. In contrast, Christopher Leise¹¹ argues that *Gilead* offers a rereading of Calvinism after its passage through Puritanism, with insights for the modern reader which are consonant rather than at odds with Calvin’s original intentions. Robinson’s Calvin is generous and community-spirited, focusing on the earthly as the place in which God is made manifest. The novel, for Leise, embodies Calvin’s assertion that ‘[w]e ought not to rack our brains about God; but rather, we should contemplate him in his works’.¹² Throughout the novel, moments of heightened perception signal an awareness of God which is open to all who choose to recognise the incandescence of which Calvin wrote. This is summed up effectively in Ames’s

form and content cannot be separated in narrative, and that to separate experience from doctrine is to limit the novel unnecessarily. For Hinojosa, a Calvinist doctrine of Christian *agape*, demanding costly reconciliation, infuses the novel and informs Robinson’s writing. Hinojosa does not consider the role Barth’s theology might play in the novel.

¹⁰ Todd Shy, “Religion and Marilynne Robinson”, *Salmagundi* 155-156 (Summer 2007), 251-264.

¹¹ Christopher Leise, ““That little incandescence”: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*”, *Studies in the Novel* 41:3 (Fall 2009), 348-367.

¹² Calvin (I.v.9), quoted in Leise, “That little incandescence”, 348.

realisation that 'wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see' (279).

As Leise argues, the recognition of the presence of the divine in the world of the ordinary which Calvin stressed is one explanatory motif in the novel. In particular, and going beyond Leise, this recognition informs the use of the parable of the Prodigal Son in the narrative. Ames is shown to recommend the message of the parable to others in his preaching at different points in the novel in terms of relationships on an earthly and spiritual level, but it is only at the end that he is able fully to inhabit the perspective in the parable which he had encouraged others to take. With 'willingness to see' (279) has come a new and profound experience of God in the world. Ames has shifted his perspective from that of the older brother to that of the father, not only as father to his own son but also to Jack, which has brought him into communion with the 'embracing, incomprehensible reality' of God (272). It has also enabled him to accept the role of the younger son in the parable, and brought him home to 'himself' (Luke 15.17) and to a likeness of Christ. This shift in theological perspective is influenced by Calvin but ultimately relates more to Barth, because it is Barth who argues that God in Christ comes as the one who is judged as well as saviour, encountering himself as judge and lifting the burden of judgement from the shoulders of humanity. Ames inhabits the parable of the Prodigal Son throughout the novel by discovering (or having a 'willingness to see') how to be different characters within the parable at different times. By the end he is able to offer the love of the father *and* to receive love like the younger son: both signalling a deepening Christlikeness. The release from judgement which he experiences in this inhabiting of the parable correlates with Barth's Christological use of the story.

2. Barth in *Gilead*

The first episode in which Barth appears in the novel emphasises the close connection between Calvin and Barth in Ames's theological understanding and the persona he wishes to portray to others. It comes when Ames describes a moment when he feels moved to dance, in response to music on the radio. The thought that this exertion might lead to his demise makes him think he should have a book to hand at such a moment, so it would be endowed with his 'especial recommendation' - or perhaps with 'unpleasant associations', as he follows the thought process through. But he offers us his selection: Donne, Herbert, Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, or Vol 2 of Calvin's *Institutes* (which, significantly, discusses God as Redeemer). The black comedy of the scene is emphasised by Ames's comment that this choice does not signal any disrespect to volume 1 of the *Institutes* (in which God as Creator is considered). The importance of Barth to Ames's theological development, and to the image of himself which he wishes to leave for others, is established by this literal holding together of Barth's commentary with Calvin's *Institutes*. The work of Barth is at the heart of the way Ames presents who he is to his son and, by extension, to his readers.

Robinson is as explicit about her theological influences as she presents Ames to be. Writing of her own understanding of faith, Robinson presents herself firmly on the modern liberal rather than conservative side of American Protestant Christianity:

The liberal criticism, rejection of the idea that one could be securely persuaded of one's own salvation and could even apply a fairly objective standard to the state of others' souls, was in fact a return to Calvinism and its insistence on the utter freedom of God. That is to say, it was a rejection on theological grounds of a novel doctrine. So here has

opened the great divide in American Protestant Christianity. I fall on the liberal side of this division.¹³

While it is Calvinism which is specifically referred to here, the ‘insistence on the utter freedom of God’ is also a strong feature of Barth’s theology of salvation. Robinson’s admiration of Barth is signalled by her assertion that ‘I think that the great modern Calvinist was Karl Barth’.¹⁴ Barth’s ongoing debt to Calvin is well-established, although he refuted Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination and argued instead for a form of universal salvation.¹⁵ For Barth, the freely-chosen incarnation of God in Christ signalled an eternal and salvific movement towards all of humanity. Significantly, Robinson has Ames turn to Barth to explore the meaning of the freedom of God to save, as explored in the following key episode in the novel.

On Boughton Senior’s porch one evening, Jack raises the issue of predestination, saying he would like to hear Ames’s view of it (170). In the ‘uneasy silence’ which follows, Ames remarks that ‘he might find Karl Barth a help, just for the sake of conversation’, and that he has found Barth ‘full of comfort’ for his own soul, although would not necessarily recommend him to others (174). For a reader of Barth such as Ames, predestination is not about inescapable judgement and the salvation of a select few, but rather an understanding of election as God’s self-election in Christ. As Barth writes:

¹³ Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals”, p. 44.

¹⁴ Quoted in “Marilynne Robinson: Prevenient Courage”, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/marilynne-robinson-prevenient-courage>, accessed 1st November 2016. In a lecture on “The Freedom of a Christian” delivered to the Lumen Christi Institute in 2011, Robinson argued that Calvin’s thought is ‘profoundly incarnational because of God’s profound and generous identification with people’ (available at <http://www.lumenchristi.org/events/501>, accessed 1st November 2016). However, this divine identification with humanity is closer to Barth than to Calvin, and fundamental to Barth’s reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

¹⁵ Barth expressed his reservations about ‘Calvin’s doctrine of God, his view of predestination that is based on it, and its consequences in all areas of his interpretation of the Christian faith’. He continued, ‘But it is not difficult to bracket off this problematical complex. Then one can rejoice at seeing Calvin’s clear view of the centre of the gospel’, in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1976) 438.

It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because He is both the electing God and the elected man in One. It is part of the doctrine of God because originally God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of himself. Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God.¹⁶

Such a theology certainly offers hope rather than dread to those who hold to it. However, Ames's much younger wife, Lila, has more insight into the position of outsider which Jack inhabits.¹⁷ She comments to Ames that not everyone is 'comfortable' with themselves, picking up the idea of comfort raised by Ames and implicitly suggesting Barth's writing on predestination depends on a level of faith in God and in oneself which not everyone possesses (175). The reference to Barth here highlights the distance between Jack and Ames which Ames's later musings on judgement confirm.

Although Barth is not mentioned in Ames's reflections directed at his son which follow this discussion, there is a Barthian emphasis on the understanding of judgement he asserts but cannot quite apply to Jack. Ames begins:

Let me say first of all that the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression, and that to judge is wrong, the origin and essence of much error and cruelty. I am aware of these things, as I hope you are also. (176)

Barth would concur, both highlighting the human need to judge and an understanding of the work of Christ which makes this redundant:

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2.2, 3.

¹⁷ Robinson's third novel in the series, *Lila* (London: Virago, 2014), offers further insight into Lila's marginalised background, just as the second novel, *Home* (London: Virago, 2008), adds new layers of complexity and insight into the issue of race in *Gilead*.

To be a man means in practice to want to be a judge, to want to be able and competent to pronounce ourselves free and righteous and others more or less guilty....[however] the event of redemption in Jesus Christ not only compromises this position, ... but destroys it....Jesus Christ as very man and very God has taken the place of every man...He is radically totally for us, in our place.¹⁸

However, Ames goes on to focus on Jack's dishonour as he struggles to reveal what Jack has done to cause him such difficulties in connecting with him. Jack had involved himself with a girl, which led to the conception of a child, who later dies, and this for Ames 'was something no honourable man would have done'. While admitting it is a 'prejudice' of his, Ames proceeds to comment from his experience that 'those who are dishonourable never really repent and never really reform' (178). In the twenty years since this incident, Jack's family seems to have been able to forgive him, but for Ames, '[Jack] doesn't have the look of a man who has made good use of himself, if I am any judge' (182).

This internal episode is followed by an intervention by Lila which involves the parable of the Prodigal Son, to which I will return. The contrast, however, between Ames's explanation of his attitude towards Jack is clearly at odds with the notion of judgement of others which his theological companion, Barth, expounds:

It is ...an affliction always to have to make it clear to ourselves so that we can cling to it that others are in one way or another in the wrong, and to have to rack our brains how we can make it clear to them, and either bring them to an amendment of their ways or give them up as hopeless...We are all in process of dying from this office of judge which we have arrogated to ourselves. It is, therefore, a liberation that has come to pass in Jesus Christ that we are deposed

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, 232.

and dismissed from this office because He has come to exercise it in our place....I am not the Judge. Jesus Christ is Judge. The matter is taken out of my hands. And that means liberation. A great anxiety is lifted, the greatest of all.¹⁹

Barth clearly identifies the burden Ames feels because of his failure to avoid judging Jack, and offers a vision of an alternative perspective which Ames seems to be longing for as his life comes to a close. By weaving explicit references to Barth into Ames's reflections, Robinson offers elements of Barth's theology as an implicit alternative for both Ames and Jack: for Jack, a new understanding of predestination is presented; for Ames, there is a possibility of reconciliation with Jack which might lead to a wider reconciliation of himself with God. The reader is drawn in to the open and mutually respectful space for theological reflection created in the scene on Boughton's porch and in Ames's study. At this stage in the novel, there is no resolution. Instead the reader is left with a sense that Ames has further to go in his application of the theology which has underpinned his life to the real situation which confronts him.

There will be a parallel scene on Ames's porch later in the novel in which Karl Barth will again be invoked as a talisman to initiate further conversation between Ames and Jack. This time, the discussion will lead to Ames reflecting that '[t]here in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particulars and just feel the presence of his [Jack's] mortal and immortal being' (224). It will also lead to him overhearing Lila and Jack talk about their understanding of home, and to him realising that they have all shared a similarly fractured experience of homecoming. A reference to Barth offers a starting point for deeper and ongoing theological reflection. Robinson argues that such moments are important aspects of the Protestant tradition she seeks to defend:

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1, 233-234.

It is worth remembering that such a common, non-judgmental space is fully consistent with faithful doubt, as it were, which has not only the very humane consequence of allowing us to live together in peace and mutual respect, but also a strong theological and scriptural grounding. It is first of all the responsibility of liberal or mainline Protestants to remember this, because insofar as it is an aspect of their tradition, they should understand it and be able to speak for it. A very great deal depends on its being understood and defended.²⁰

By immersing the reader in Ames's inner life of theological reflection, Robinson defends her own theology and offers the reader a way to understand it at a deep level. The theological debate between Barth, Jack and Ames takes place in a narrative space which the reader is invited to inhabit: thus it may be argued that Robinson fulfils her responsibility as a liberal Christian.

Barth appears in another scene in the novel which offers the reader new insights into the characters of Jack and Ames (and explains something significant about Ames's understanding of home). It also places American Protestantism within a particular perspective for the reader to contemplate. Ames and Jack meet in Ames's church in another attempt to understand each other and reach reconciliation. Jack refers to the 'colored people' who once lived in Gilead, and comments that it is 'a pity they are gone', which the reader will come to realise is a failed attempt to introduce the subject of his wife and child. Jack then asserts 'You admire Karl Barth' (196). Ames finds the statement aggressive and does not understand the importance of what Jack is trying to say. Jack makes the point that Barth is critical of American religion, while finding it important enough to engage with it, and wonders why 'American Christianity always seems to wait for the real thinking to be done elsewhere'.

²⁰ Robinson, "Onward, Christian Liberals", p. 51.

Ames admits to his reader that he has thought the same, while refusing to admit this to Jack, and he invites the reader to consider the validity of such a critical claim. While Jack has connected with Ames on an intellectual level, he has also raised the issue of why Ames has not left Gilead, as his brother and father did. Barth here represents a world of thinking to which Ames has had access although not leaving 'home'. Barth's theology represents 'old world' thinking, in which Ames has found comfort and inspiration as he has resisted 'new world' wanderlust.

However, Ames's interaction with Jack and his troubled relationship with home demands a new understanding of the connection between his intellectual and theological life and the place where he has rooted his ministry. It demands 'real thinking' from Ames in the here and now of his and Jack's situation. Ames asserts his belief in the importance of spiritual authenticity even over the theological reflection offered by Barth:

When this old sanctuary is full of silence and prayer, every book Karl Barth ever will write would not be a feather in the scales against it from the point of view of profundity, and I would not believe in Barth's own authenticity if I did not also believe he would know and recognise the truth of that, and honor it, too. (197)

Ames here asserts the compatibility of his commitment to Barth with his decision to stay in Gilead and honour the importance of those who have lived lives of faithful witness there. However, he faces a fresh theological struggle to relate with religious authenticity towards Jack. It will take a further interaction with Jack to lead him to a new understanding of the significance of that decision in terms of his judgement of others and Jack in particular, and his multiple roles in the metanarrative of the Prodigal Son parable. This will include a new appreciation of Barth's theological understanding of the Prodigal Son and its application to his experience of life in Gilead. Religious authenticity and theological belief develop in

Ames's self-understanding at different rates in the novel, but both are needed for the resolution of homecoming.

3. The Parable of the Prodigal Son and Barth in *Gilead*

As Rebecca Painter has noted, the parable of the Prodigal Son offers an overarching narrative which ultimately draws Ames and Jack into a new relationship with each other.²¹ The importance of the parable to the theology of Barth gives its role in the novel added significance. In the following section, I offer an analysis of some of the direct references to the parable in the novel, highlighting the way these references shadow the development of Ames's thinking around homecoming and Christlikeness which are features of Barth's reading of the parable.

The central themes of the parable are undoubtedly echoed in the novel. Both the parable and the novel raise questions about the meaning and significance of home; whether or not it is possible to return home unchanged; and what does it mean to forgive and to love the Prodigal. Characters in the novel assume different roles in the parable at specific points. As Painter argues, Marilynne Robinson novels offer 'seasoned contemporary explorations of the mysteries of scripture, by means of characters who embody nuanced variations on biblical roles'.²² Painter goes on to discuss Robinson's 'creation of modern versions of Ruth and the Prodigal Son, whose stories compel readers to contemplate the realities of loyalty, prodigality and grace through a lens of reverent uncertainty'.²³ For Painter, the focus in *Gilead* is on Ames as the embodiment of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Certainly Ames's developing understanding of himself as the embodiment of the father in the parable is an important theme of the novel, but there are other characters

²¹Rebecca Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction", *Christianity and Literature* 59:2 (Winter 2010), 321-340.

²² Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality", 321.

²³ Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality", 321.

involved, and other embodiments to be considered. Ames writes about his own father, who had mourned the leaving of his older son, Edward, to study in Germany where he had lost his faith.²⁴ Ames is then the older son figure, who stays, loyal to his father and his home, and is anxious for a sign of his father's approval. The dynamics of the parable are disrupted when Edward is at first effectively turned away from his family home on his return, and later provides a home (both physical and spiritual) for his aged parents. The role of older brother is not one which sits comfortably with Ames's gradual unfolding of his family history.²⁵

Ames is also the actual father of a son, to whom he is writing; as well as the godfather to his namesake, John Ames Boughton (Jack), who has returned home as his father is dying. Jack is the most beloved by his family, but distinctly prodigal, and his actions in the far country are finally revealed to both Ames and the reader at the end of the novel. As Painter and D.W. Schmidt argue,²⁶ the resolution of the novel is clearly identified with Ames's acceptance of the role as father and Jack as son in a neat correlation with the narrative of the parable.

²⁴ Ames notes that his brother was named 'Edwards' after their uncle, who had been named after the revered theologian, Jonathan Edwards, and who had run away after his mother died 'in the confusion of the times'. Ames comments that his brother had never liked the final 's' and he 'dropped it when he left for college' (98). The move suggests a rejection of his religious heritage and a deliberate plan to reinvent himself rather than a panicked reaction to chaos. Furthermore, while 'they never found' the original Edwards, the reinvented Edward is found by his parents and the values his new persona represents are accepted by them. The contrast could not be drawn more clearly.

²⁵ The role of Ames's grandfather in the novel further complicates the easy identification of the characters with the parable. His violent reaction to the reality of slavery effectively marginalises him from his son's home, but the view of the narrator Ames, his grandson, is somewhat withheld by his youthful perspective on the events of his grandfather's life. When Ames stands with his father at his grandfather's grave, he describes his father 'asking the Lord's pardon, and his father's, as well'. Ames goes on 'I missed my grandfather mightily, and I felt the need of pardon, too' (16). It is left unsaid whether Ames's need for pardon stems from his understanding of being a son to his father, or of being a grandson to his grandfather. Hinojosa offers a detailed analysis of these relationships, and of the interaction between violent resistance and pacifism, in "John Ames as Historiographer".

²⁶ Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality"; D.W. Schmidt, "In the Name of the Father: Male Voice, Feminist Authorship, and the Reader in *Gilead*", in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 66:2 (2014), 119-130. See also J. H. Hobbs, "Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*", in *Christianity and Literature* 52:2 (2010), 241-262, in which Hobbs argues that the parable is more about the Prodigality of the father's love than it is about the son.

However, there is a further intertextual layer in the shape of Barth's use of the parable and in the notion of Ames as the embodiment of the Prodigal Son himself. Once Ames's father is settled with Edward, he attempts to persuade Ames to leave Gilead. Gilead, from the perspective of the far country seems 'a relic, an archaism' (268). In response, Ames asserts his intellectual independence and scope, but he finds himself 'homesick for a place [he] never left' (269). Later, a letter from his father brings even greater 'loneliness ... and darkness', and he comments that 'my father threw me back on myself, and on the Lord' (269). On one level, Ames has experienced the despair of the Prodigal Son, without ever leaving home. His father's attitude towards him, and towards the place they have both called home, has alienated him deeply. One way of reading the novel is to trace Ames's homecoming to himself as well as to Jack, his growing Christlikeness in the process, and his acceptance of the love of his heavenly father.

There are three places in which the parable is referred to directly. In the first, Ames introduces the reader to Jack, and Boughton's doting on his son is compared to that of God's for his children:

The lost sheep, the lost coin. The Prodigal Son, not to put too fine a point on it. I have said at least once a week my whole adult life that there is an absolute disjunction between our Father's love and our deserving. Still, when I see this same disjunction between human parents and children, it always irritates me a little. (I know you will be and I hope you are an excellent man, and I will love you absolutely if you are not.) (83)

Here Ames acknowledges his irritation at the 'disjunction' between the love of other parents and their children's deserving of that love, while he asserts that 'disjunction' will also apply to him and the son he is addressing if necessary. He reveals his own public persona, as the

minister who preaches the overwhelming love of the heavenly father demonstrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Equally, he admits his entirely human response to the reflection of that love in family life, his own and those he has observed. His invoking of the parable ('not to put too fine a point on it') here suggests a distance between his theology and his experience, rather than an integration. The later information he offers about the relationship between himself and his own father perhaps goes some way towards explaining his irritation: he has not received the love of his father in a way which overcomes his sense of isolation.

Ames's response to his own sermon which Lila looks out for him to read explores this distance between preaching and experience further. The setting is the day after the episode on Boughton's porch in which Jack presses Ames on his views about predestination and Ames puts forward Barth's perspective. The text of the sermon is from the Lord's Prayer, 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. The sermon makes the point that the existence of debt is the one sufficient reason for its forgiveness in scripture. Divine grace, the sermon goes on, is to be compared with forgiveness, and is demonstrated in the story of 'the Prodigal Son and his restoration to his place in his father's house, though he neither asks to be restored as son or even repents of the grief he has caused his father' (183). Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation (*Church Dogmatics* IV.1) is clearly in view here, with its understanding of God's move towards reconciliation not as a response to human sin, but as the working out of the original good will of God the creator. God freely chooses to love humanity and is on humanity's side from all eternity. For Barth, forgiveness is always ahead of rather than catching up with human experience.

Ames reflects that the sermon is both effective and a sound reading, in the way it points to Jesus putting his hearer in the role of the father, the character who forgives:

And grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves.

(183-184)

Lila acts as an agent of grace here, presenting him with the sermon to read afresh, which prompts him to remember the contrasting experience of being a father which both he and Jack have had. His was cut short by the death of his daughter, while Jack's was squandered by his refusal to engage with his first child. But the sermon and the parable fail to affect Ames, as he admits: 'I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin' (187). In terms of what Ames has already argued, this refusal denies him the experience of godlikeness through the honouring of the image of God in the other and of knowing the will of God worked through him. Crucially, it prevents the integration of his public and private lives, the 'great restoration of [himself] to [himself]' which the Prodigal Son expresses as a 'coming to himself' and which leads to his return from the 'far country' (Luke 15.17, 13). Ames's inability to be the father of the parable inhibits his own opportunity to be the welcomed and loved returning son.

It is only by the end of the novel that there is a resolution to the disjunction between Ames's self-perception and his belief in the theological significance of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The moment comes once Ames has heard Jack's story about having a wife and child he cannot be with, and realises that he is leaving Gilead. Once Ames understands that Jack is an embodiment of the father of the parable in his longing for his child, he is able to accept that they both share a 'sad and splendid treasure' in their heart. They both would go to any length to be with their wife and child, although different circumstances make this difficult if not impossible in the long term. Ames's new understanding of the parable draws Jack's father, Boughton, into Ames's new understanding of God-like fatherhood. Ames

realises why Boughton would abandon all his faithful children for Jack. Like the father in the parable, he would

follow that one son whom he has never known, whom he has favoured as one does a wound, and he would defend him with a strength he does not have, sustain him with a bounty beyond any resource he could ever dream of having. ..he would pardon every transgression...he would be that extravagant. (271-272)

As Ames admits, he has in the past identified himself with the 'good son, so to speak, the one who never left his father's house- even when his father did, a fact which surely puts [his] credentials beyond all challenge'. He concedes 'I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained' (272). Lila's appearance in his life, and his son's birth, has made a new identification possible, which Jack's story has finally resolved for him. While he has been the older brother with all his attributes of faithfulness and also of resentment, he has also become the father, able to tell Boughton 'I love [Jack] as much as you meant me to' (279), and to find peace with himself and God. However, he has also learned how to be loved through his new relationships, which has allowed him to embody the persona of the son who has known the far country and been welcomed home. This understanding has come from an implicit interaction with the theology of Calvin and, more significantly, of Barth.

By the end of the novel, the grace of God has become real for Ames, however poor its reflection may be in the actual love of a father for his child. Ames is able to tell his son:

There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal. (272)

Here the theological resonance is more with Calvin than with Barth, as other commentators such as Leise have discussed.²⁷ However, the presence of Barth and Barthian theology is particularly significant in the novel in the correlation between the narrative and the parable of the Prodigal Son. For Barth the parable of the Prodigal Son famously offers a defining concept which informs his overarching understanding of the work of Christ and the eternal purposes of God. In Christ, God goes into the far country of the parable, to make humanity's situation God's situation: 'he accepts solidarity with the creature, with man, in order to convert man and the world to himself'.²⁸ This act of obedience and humility is the foundational act of God towards humanity:

In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ, God acknowledges man; He accepts responsibility for his being and nature...[H]e does not hold aloof... God shows himself to be the true and great God in the fact that he can and will let his grace bear this cost, that He is capable and willing and ready for this condescension, this act of extravagance, this far country.²⁹

The use of the term 'extravagance' here echoes in Ames's description of his new understanding of Boughton's 'extravagant' pardoning of Jack's every transgression (272). The word is not used in the parable itself, but Ames and Barth both use it in connection with the father's radical acceptance of the transgressive nature of the child which the parable narrates.

For Barth there is a specific analogy between the lost son of the parable and the work of Jesus Christ. Both the parable and the narrative of salvation through the incarnation rely on the movement from the heights to the depths, from home to the far

²⁷ E.g. Leise, "That little incandescence", 348-367.

²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, 199.

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, 158.

country and back again. This movement, in the case of salvation, is initiated by the free obedience and humility of God in Christ. For Barth, this action of Christ invites a response in the terms of the parable. When a person responds to the reality of which the parable speaks by arising and going to the Father, they ‘come to themselves’ and their freedom to do so is enfolded in the free choice God had already made in Christ for them. The parable is pivotal to Barth’s theology, informing his Christology, soteriology as well as his understanding of sin and justification.

The notion of Barth’s understanding of the parable as a wide-ranging analogy in the novel may be demonstrated by a further textual connection. There is an echo between Barth’s understanding of Christ in the parable and Ames’s struggle to connect with Jack. Ames is fearful that his wife will turn to Jack once he has died, and worries about the relationship between the pity and love which Lila offers to Jack. Ames comments that it ‘is one of the best traits of good people that they love where they pity’ (213). For Ames, this has led to situations in which these good people have come to harm, and he has sought to warn them against getting into such a position. It is difficult to advise caution, however, he goes on, because such love following pity is ‘in a word, Christlike’. Barth would concur, arguing that in Christ’s journey into the far country, an act of pity and love, ‘God allows the world and humanity to take part in the history of the inner life of His Godhead, in the movement in which from and to all eternity he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’³⁰ In the resolution of the novel, for Ames, love for Jack has indeed followed pity. Ames has taken on ‘Christlike’-ness in his act of blessing Jack, and in his affirmation to him that ‘[w]e all love you, you know’ (275-276).³¹ Jack is not presented as particularly understanding what this moment means for Ames, but that too indicates a Barthian identification of Ames’s graceful action with God’s

³⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, 215.

³¹ As Robinson comments, in Painter’s “Further Thoughts”, ‘the blessing Ames gives Jack is an act of recognition that blesses Ames too... blessing is mutual’, 490.

free choosing of grace towards humanity. Both are complete in themselves, without the need for response.

By the end of the novel, Ames is able to identify with the younger son of the parable of the Prodigal Son, as well as the father and the older brother. He has returned from the far country of his own protected sense of isolation, with the help of Lila and his own son. He has given up the need to judge the other, namely Jack and, in doing so, he not only ‘comes to himself’, but he participates in something of the divine. I have suggested that each of these aspects of the novel echoes a Barthian presence in the text, which is bolstered by direct references to Barth’s influence on Ames’s theological thinking. Ames’s shifting relationship with Jack, and its implication for Ames’s understanding of himself in relation to God, invites identification with the forgiving father, as Schmidt³² had argued. It also opens the possibility of experiencing the welcome homecoming of the Prodigal Son and the participation in Christlikeness which Barth’s reading of the parable has encouraged.

I have argued that Ames inhabits the parable of the Prodigal Son throughout the novel, discovering how to be different characters within it at different times. In the end he is able to offer the love of the father *and* to receive love like the younger son, while sharing in something of the ministry of Christ. With his theological hero Barth, he comes to believe, live and preach with integrity:

To pronounce us free in passing sentence... that is why [Jesus Christ] went into the far country as the obedient Son of the Father. ..That is why the Father sent him... the execution of this strange judgement. If this strange judgement had not taken place, there would be only a lost world and lost men. Since it has taken

³² Schmidt, “In the Name of the Father”, 130.

place, we can only recognise and believe and proclaim to the whole world and all men: Not lost.³³

By the end of the novel Ames understands that Gilead is, for him, a place of Barthian ‘Christlike’-ness (280), and he is free from judgement and from the need to judge. Jack has left, but Ames has discovered what it means to be home. It means to be ‘Not lost’ but, like the Prodigal Son, truly found.

Ames’s closing act, prayer (282), may be read as his acceptance of a Barthian understanding of election, grounded in Christ’s act of self-determination in going into the Prodigal son’s far country. Bruce MacCormack’s summary of Barth’s theology as it relates to calling, grace and human response might have been written to describe the resolution of Ames’s narrative, and its implicit invitation to accept and respond to the action of God the Father in Christ the son:

To the act of Self-determination in which God chose himself for us there corresponds an act of human self-determination in which Jesus chose himself for God and other humans and then, and on that basis, we too choose ourselves for God and others. True humanity is realized in us where and when we live in the posture of prayer. Where this occurs, that which we “are” corresponds to that which we have been chosen to be.

There, true humanity is actualized by faith and in obedience.³⁴

The connection between Ames, Barth and Robinson is not over-played in the novel but it may be read in the narrative interplay between the parable of the Prodigal Son, the development of Ames’s self-understanding, and Barth’s influential theological reading of the parable.

³³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, 222.

³⁴ Bruce MacCormack, “Grace and Being: The role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology”, in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 92-110, 108.

Readers who recognise the connection are offered a deeper understanding of Ames's theological and existential transformation. They may also be drawn in to responding to the implicit invitation to come home.

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